

Legislative session begins; how can schools get \$4 billion more?

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OLYMPIA--Washington's lawmakers have opened this year's legislative session amid predictions of a long and contentious debate focused on budget and tax votes for the K-12 education system.

Lawmakers are confronted with a mountain of expensive problems to solve, ranging from transportation to mental health. But education funding is pivotal.

The state Supreme Court held the Legislature in contempt last year for engaging in "an ongoing violation of its constitutional duty to K-12 children," by not adequately funding public education. Combined with the responsibility to fund a class-size initiative passed in the recent election, education will likely take a large chunk out of the budget, creating a deficit that may not be filled without spending cuts and tax increases.

Meeting the requirements of the Supreme Court's decision is estimated to cost around \$2 billion, with the class-size initiative expected to tack on another \$2 billion.

Gov. Jay Inslee is pushing a budget proposal that relies on establishing a 7 percent capital-gains tax, a carbon-emissions tax, an excise tax on vaporizers, a 50-cent-per-pack increase on cigarettes and various tax break repeals.

But the governor's proposals are under fire as Republican lawmakers question whether tax increases are necessary to fill the spending gap. At an Associated Press pre-session leadership forum Jan. 8, Inslee rejected a charge from Senate budget Chairman Andy Hill, R-Redmond, that the increases were included in his proposed budget as a first rather than last resort. Hill has also denied that the state faces a true budget deficit.

"When you do the math, you have to generate additional revenue," Inslee said, claiming the new taxes will help progressivize Washington's tax system more than traditional "fallback" increases on sales and Business and Occupation taxes.

"If we can tax pollution, which we don't like, instead of business growth, which we do, that's a good decision," Inlee said. "If we can tax higher income folks through a capital-gains tax instead of lower-income folks when they buy a pair of shoes, that's a good decision."

Hill disagrees, however, claiming that talk of a regressive tax system is code for thinking an income tax is needed.

“When we raise taxes, we’re taking money out of your pockets, and when we do that, we better be sure that we have exhausted all other ways of spending the existing money we’ve taken out of your pocket,” Hill said.

The 2015 legislative session began Monday, Jan. 12. Among the major issues facing the 105-day session are efforts to increase the minimum wage, fix the state’s mental-health system, reduce the rate of poverty-related crimes, and increase cleanup funding for oil train spills.